War Guilt in the Middle East

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The chronic Middle East crisis goes back – as do many crises – to World War I. The British, in return for mobilizing the Arab peoples against their oppressors of imperial Turkey, promised the Arabs their independence when the war was over. But, at the same time, the British government, with characteristic double-dealing, was promising Arab Palestine as a "National Home" for organized Zionism. These promises were not on the same moral plane: for in the former case, the Arabs were being promised their own land freed from Turkish domination; and in the latter, world Zionism was being promised a land most emphatically not its own. When World War I was over, the British unhesitatingly chose to keep the wrong promise, the one to world Zionism. Its choice was not difficult; if it had kept its promise to the Arabs, Great Britain would have had to pull gracefully out of the Middle East and turn that land over to its inhabitants; but, to fulfill its promise to Zionism, Britain had to remain as a conquering, imperial power ruling over Arab Palestine. That it chose the imperial course is hardly surprising.

We must, then, go back still further in history: for what was world Zionism? Before the French Revolution, the Jews of Europe had been largely encased in ghettoes, and there emerged from ghetto life a distinct Jewish cultural and ethnic (as well as religious) identity, with Yiddish as the common language (Hebrew being only the ancient

language of religious ritual). After the French Revolution, the Jews of Western Europe were emancipated from ghetto life, and they then faced a choice of where to go from there. One group, the heirs of the Enlightenment, chose and advocated the choice of casting off narrow, parochial ghetto culture on behalf of assimilation into the culture and the environment of the Western world. While assimilationism was clearly the rational course in America and Western Europe, this route could not easily be followed in Eastern Europe, where the ghetto walls still held. In Eastern Europe, therefore, the Jews turned toward various movements for preservation of the Jewish ethnic and cultural identity. Most prevalent was Bundism, the viewpoint of the Jewish Bund, which advocated Jewish national self-determination, up to and including a Jewish state in the predominantly Jewish areas of Eastern Europe. (Thus, according to Bundism, the city of Vilna, in Eastern Europe, with a majority population of Jews, would be part of a newly-formed Jewish state.) Another, less powerful, group of Jews, the Territorialist Movement, despairing of the future of Jews in Eastern Europe, advocated preserving the Yiddish Jewish identity by forming Jewish colonies and communities (not states) in various unpopulated, virgin areas of the world.

Given the conditions of European Jewry in the late 19th and turn of the 20th centuries, all of these movements had a rational groundwork. The one Jewish movement that made no sense was Zionism, a movement which began blended with Jewish Territorialism. But while the Territorialists simply wanted to preserve Jewish-Yiddish identity in a newly developed land of their own, Zionism began to insist on a Jewish land in Palestine alone. The fact that Palestine was not a virgin land, but already occupied by an Arab peasantry, meant nothing to the ideologues of Zionism. Furthermore, the Zionists, far from hoping to preserve ghetto Yiddish culture, wished to bury it and to substitute a new culture and a new language based on an artificial secular expansion of ancient religious Hebrew.

In 1903, the British offered territory in Uganda for Jewish colonization, and the rejection of this offer by the Zionists polarized the Zionist and Territorialist movements, which previously had been fused together. From then on, the Zionists would be committed to the blood-and-soil mystique of Palestine, and Palestine alone, while the Territorialists would seek virgin land elsewhere in the world.

Because of the Arabs resident in Palestine, Zionism had to become in practice an ideology of conquest. After World War I, Great Britain seized control of Palestine and used its sovereign power to promote, encourage, and abet the expropriation of Arab lands for Zionist use and for Zionist immigration. Often old Turkish land titles would be dredged up and purchased cheaply, thus expropriating the Arab peasantry on behalf of European Zionist immigration. Into the heart of the peasant and nomadic Arab world of the Middle East there thus came as colonists, and on the backs and on the bayonets of British imperialism, a largely European colonizing people.

While Zionism was now committed to Palestine as a Jewish National Home, it was not yet committed to the aggrandizement of an independent Jewish state in Palestine. Indeed, only a minority of Zionists favored a Jewish state, and many of these had broken off from official Zionism, under the influence of Vladimir Jabotinsky, to form the Zionist-Revisionist movement to agitate for a Jewish state to rule historic ancient Palestine on both sides of the Jordan River. It is not surprising that Jabotinsky expressed great admiration for the militarism and the social philosophy of Mussolini's fascism.

At the other wing of Zionism were the cultural Zionists, who opposed the idea of a political Jewish state. In particular, the Ihud (Unity) movement, centered around Martin Buber and a group of distinguished Jewish intellectuals from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, advocated, when the British should leave, a binational Jewish-

Arab state in Palestine, with neither religious group to dominate the other, but both to work in peace and harmony to build the land of Palestine.

But the inner logic of Zionism was not to be brooked. In the tumultuous World Zionist convention at New York's Hotel Biltmore in 1942, Zionism, for the first time, adopted the goal of a Jewish state in Palestine, and nothing less. The extremists had won out. From then on, there was to be permanent crisis in the Middle East.

Pressured from opposite sides by Zionists anxious for a Jewish state and by Arabs seeking an independent Palestine, the British finally decided to pull out after World War II and to turn the problem over to the United Nations. As the drive for a Jewish state intensified, the revered Dr. Judah Magnes, president of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and head of the Ihud movement, bitterly denounced "Zionist Totalitarianism," which, he charged, is trying to bring "the entire Jewish people under its influence by force and violence. I have not yet seen the Zionist terrorists called by their rightful names: Killers – brutalized men and women. … All Jews in America share in the guilt, even those not in accord with the activities of this new pagan leadership, but who sit at ease with folded hands…." Shortly afterward, Dr. Magnes felt it necessary to exile himself from Palestine and emigrate to the United States.

Under unbelievably intense pressure from the United States, the UN – including an enthusiastic U.S. and USSR – reluctantly approved a Palestine partition plan in November 1947, a plan that formed the basis of the British pullout and the Israel declaration of existence on May 15 of the following year. The partition plan granted the Jews, who had a negligible fraction of Palestine's land, almost half the land area of the country. Zionism had succeeded in carving out a European Jewish state over Arab territory in the Middle East. But this is by no means all. The UN agreement had provided (a) that Jerusalem be internationalized under UN rule, and (b) that there be an

economic union between the new Jewish and Arab Palestine states. These were the basic conditions under which the UN approved partition. Both were promptly and brusquely disregarded by Israel – thus launching an escalating series of aggressions against the Arabs of the Middle East.

While the British were still in Palestine, the Zionist paramilitary forces began to crush the Palestinian Arab armed forces in a series of civil war clashes. But, more fatefully, on April 9, 1948, the fanatical Zionist-Revisionist terrorists grouped in the organization Irgun Zvai Leumi massacred a hundred women and children in the Arab village of Deir Yassin. By the advent of Israel's independence on May 15 the Palestinian Arabs, demoralized, were fleeing in panic from their homes and from the threat of massacre. The neighboring Arab states then sent in their troops. Historians are wont to describe the ensuing war as an invasion of Israel by the Arab states, heroically rebuffed by Israel, but since all of the fighting took place on Arab territory, this interpretation is clearly incorrect. What happened, in fact, is that Israel managed to seize large chunks of territory assigned to the Palestinian Arabs by the partition agreement, including the Arab areas of Western Galilee, Arab west-central Palestine as "corridor" to Jerusalem, and the Arab cities of Jaffa and Beersheba. The bulk of Jerusalem – the New City – was also seized by Israel and the UN internationalization plan discarded. The Arab armies were hampered by their own inefficiency and disunity and by a series of UN-imposed truces broken only long enough for Israel to occupy more Arab territory.

By the time of the permanent armistice agreement of Feb. 24, 1949, then, 600,000 Jews had created a state which had originally housed 850,000 Arabs (out of a total Palestinian Arab population of 1.2 million). Of these Arabs, three-quarters of a million had been driven out from their lands and homes, and the remaining remnant was subject to a harsh military rule which, two decades later, is still in force. The homes, lands, and bank accounts of the fleeing Arab refugees were promptly confiscated by

Israel and handed over to Jewish immigrants. Israel has long claimed that the three-quarters of a million Arabs were not driven out by force but rather by their own unjustified panic induced by Arab leaders – but the key point is that everyone recognizes Israel's adamant refusal to let these refugees return and reclaim the property taken from them. From that day to this, for two decades, these hapless Arab refugees, their ranks now swollen by natural increase to 1.3 million, have continued to live in utter destitution in refugee camps around the Israeli borders, barely kept alive by meager UN funds and CARE packages, living only for the day when they will return to their rightful homes.

In the areas of Palestine originally assigned to the Arabs, no Palestinian Arab government remained. The acknowledged leader of the Palestinian Arabs, their Grand Mufti Haj Amin el-Husseini, was summarily deposed by the longtime British tool, King Abdullah of Trans-Jordan, who simply confiscated the Arab regions of east-central Palestine, as well as the Old City of Jerusalem. (King Abdullah's Arab Legion had been built, armed, staffed, and even headed by such colonialist British officers as Glubb Pasha.)

On the Arab refugees, Israel takes the attitude that the taxpayers of the world (i.e., largely the taxpayers of the United States) should kick in to finance a vast scheme to resettle the Palestinian refugees somewhere in the Middle East – i.e., somewhere far from Israel. The refugees, however, understandably have no interest in being resettled; they want their own homes and properties back, period.

The armistice agreement of 1949 was supposed to be policed by a series of Mixed Armistice Commissions, composed of Israel and her Arab neighbors. Very soon, however, Israel dissolved the Mixed Armistice Commissions and began to encroach

upon more and more Arab territory. Thus, the officially demilitarized zone of El Auja was summarily seized by Israel.

Since the Middle East was still technically in a state of war (there was an armistice but no treaty of peace), Egypt, from 1949 on, continued to block the Strait of Tiran – the entrance to the Gulf of Aqaba – to all Israeli shipping and to all trade with Israel. In view of the importance of the blocking of the Gulf of Aqaba in the 1967 war, it is important to remember that nobody griped at this Egyptian action: nobody said that Egypt was violating international law by closing this "peaceful international waterway." (Making any waterway open to all nations, according to international law, requires two conditions: (a) consent by the powers abutting on the waterway, and (b) no state of war existing between any powers on the waterway. Neither of these conditions obtained for the Gulf of Aqaba: Egypt has never consented to such an agreement, and Israel has been in a state of war with Egypt since 1949, so that Egypt blocked the Gulf to Israeli shipping unchallenged from 1949 on.)

Israel's history of continuing aggression had only begun. Seven years later, in 1956, Israel, conjoined to British and French imperialist armies, jointly invaded Egypt. And oh how proudly Israel consciously imitated Nazi blitzkrieg and sneak-attack tactics! And oh how ironic that the very same American Establishment that had for years denounced Nazi blitzkriegs and sneak-attacks was suddenly lost in admiration for the very same tactics employed by Israel! But in this case, the United States, momentarily abandoning its intense and continued devotion to the Israeli cause, joined with Russia in forcing the combined aggressors back from Egyptian soil. But Israel did not agree to pull its forces out of the Sinai Peninsula until Egypt agreed to allow a special UN Emergency Force to administer the Sharm-el Sheikh fortress commanding the Strait of Tiran. Characteristically, Israel scornfully refused the UNEF permission to patrol its

side of the border. Only Egypt agreed to allow access to the UN forces, and it was because of this that the Gulf of Aqaba was opened to Israeli shipping from 1956 on.

The 1967 crisis emerged from the fact that, over the last few years, the Palestinian Arab refugees have begun to shift from their previous bleak and passive despair and begun to form guerrilla movements which have infiltrated the Israeli borders to carry their fight into the region of their lost homes. Since last year, Syria has been under the control of the most militantly anti-imperialist government that the Middle East has seen in years. Syria's encouragement to the Palestinian guerrilla forces led Israel's frenetic leaders to threaten war upon Syria and the conquest of Damascus – threats punctuated by severe reprisal raids against Syrian and Jordanian villages. At this point Egypt's premier, Gamal Abdel Nasser, who had been an anti-Israel blowhard for years, but had concentrated instead on demagogic, statist measures that wrecked Egypt's domestic economy, was challenged by the Syrians to do something concrete to help: in particular, to end UNEF control – and hence continuing Israeli shipping – in the Gulf of Aqaba. Hence, Nasser's request for the UNEF to leave. Pro-Israeli griping at U Thant's swift compliance is grotesque, when we consider that the UN forces were there only at Egyptian request, and that Israel has always adamantly refused to have the UN forces on its side of the border. It was at that point, with the closing of the Strait of Tiran, that Israel evidently began to set the stage for its next blitzkrieg war.

While giving lip-service to peaceful negotiation, the Israeli government finally knuckled under to "hawk" pressure within the country, and the appointment of the notoriously warmongering Gen. Moshe Dayan as minister of defense was obviously the signal for the Israeli blitz attack that came a few days later. The incredibly swift Israeli victories; the press glorification of Israeli tactics and strategy; the patent unreadiness of the Arab forces despite the hoopla; all this indicates to all but the most

naive the fact that Israel launched the war of 1967 – a fact that Israel scarcely bothers to deny.

One of the most repellent aspects of the 1967 slaughter is the outspoken admiration for the Israeli conquest by almost all Americans, Jew and non-Jew alike. There seems to be a sickness deep in the American soul that causes it to identify with aggression and mass murder – the swifter and more brutal the better. In all the spate of admiration for the Israeli march, how many people were there to mourn the thousands of innocent Arab civilians murdered by the Israeli use of napalm? As for Jewish chauvinism among so-called "antiwar" people on the Left, there is no more sickening demonstration of a total lack of humanity than that displayed by Margot Hentoff in the left-liberal Village Voice:

"Is there any war you DO like? If so, are you Jewish? Lucky. What a time to be Jewish. Have you ever known any Jewish pacifists? Did you know any last week? … Besides, this was a different war – an old kind of war, a kind of war in which death was life-giving and Arab deaths didn't count. What a pleasure to be, once again, in favor of a war. What a good clean wholesome feeling to cheer those jeeps careening across the television screen filled with tough, lean, hard-faced, gun-bearing, JEWISH soldiers.

"'Look at them go! WOW! ZAP! Nothing's gonna stop them now!' said an old time radical pacifist. 'This is an army of Jews!'
"Another (whose major contribution to Judaism until now has been to write articles disowning Israel and announcing that Judaism is dead and deserves to be) spent the week confusing his nationality. 'How are we doing?' he kept asking. 'How far have we gotten now?'"
(Margot Hentoff, *Tomorrow, the World*, Village Voice, June 15, 1967, p. 9).

What a “clean wholesome feeling” indeed when “Arab deaths don’t count!” Is there any difference at all between this kind of attitude and that of the Nazi persecutors of the Jews whom our press has been attacking, day in and day out, for well over twenty years?

When this war began, the Israeli leaders proclaimed that they were not interested in “one inch” of territory; their fighting was purely defensive. But now that Israel sits upon its conquests, after repeated violations of UN cease-fires, it sings a very different tune. Its forces still occupy all of the Sinai Peninsula; all of Palestinian Jordan has been seized, sending another nearly 200,000 hapless Arab refugees to join their hundreds of thousands of forlorn comrades; it has seized a goodly chunk of Syria; and Israel arrogantly proclaims that it will never, never return the Old City of Jerusalem or internationalize it; Israeli seizure of all of Jerusalem is simply “not negotiable.”

If Israel has been the aggressor in the Middle East, the role of the United States in all this has been even more unlovely. The hypocrisy of the U.S. position is almost unbelievable – or would be if we were not familiar with U.S. foreign policy over the decades. When the war first began, and it looked for a moment as if Israel were in danger, the U.S. rushed in to avow its dedication to the “territorial integrity of the Middle East” – as if the borders of 1949-67 were somehow embalmed in Holy Writ and had to be preserved at all costs. But – as soon as it was clear that Israel had won and conquered once again, America swiftly shed its supposed cherished “principles.” Now there is no more talk of the “territorial integrity of the Middle East”; now it is all “realism” and the absurdity of going back to obsolete status quo borders and the necessity for the Arabs to accept a general settlement in the Middle East, etc. How much more evidence do we need that an approving United States has always stayed in the wings, ready to come to the aid of Israel if necessary? How much more evidence do we need that Israel is now the ally and satellite of the U.S., which in the Middle East as

in so many other areas of the world has assumed the mantle once worn by British imperialism?

The one thing that Americans must not be lured into believing is that Israel is a “little” “underdog” against its mighty Arab neighbors. Israel is a European nation with a European technological standard battling a primitive and undeveloped foe; furthermore, Israel has behind it, feeding it, and financing it the massed might of countless Americans and West Europeans, as well as the Leviathan governments of the United States and its numerous allies and client states. Israel is no more a “gallant underdog” because of numerical inferiority than British imperialism was a “gallant underdog” when it conquered far more populous lands in India, Africa, and Asia.And so, Israel now sits, occupying its swollen territory, pulverizing houses and villages containing snipers, outlawing strikes of Arabs, killing Arab youths in the name of checking terrorism. But this very occupation, this very elephantiasis of Israel, provides the Arabs with a powerful long-range opportunity. In the first place, as the militant anti-imperialist regimes of Syria and Algeria now see, the Arabs can shift their strategic emphasis from hopeless conventional war with a far better armed foe to a protracted mass people’s guerrilla war. Armed with light weapons, the Arab people could carry out another “Vietnam,” another “Algeria” – another people’s guerrilla war against a heavily armed occupying army. Of course, this is a long-run threat only, because to carry it out the Arabs would have to overthrow all of their stagnant, reactionary monarchies and form a united pan-Arab nation – for the splits into nation-states in the Arab world are the consequence of the artificial machinations and depredations of British and French imperialism. But for the long run, the threat is very real.

Israel, therefore, faces a long-run dilemma which she must someday meet. Either to continue on her present course and, after years of mutual hostility and conflict be overthrown by Arab people’s guerrilla war. Or – to change direction drastically, to cut

herself loose completely from Western imperial ties, and become simply Jewish citizens of the Middle East. If she did that, then peace and harmony and justice would at last reign in that tortured region. There is ample precedent for this peaceful coexistence. For in the centuries before 19th- and 20th-century Western imperialism, Jew and Arab had always lived well and peacefully together in the Middle East. There is no inherent enmity or conflict between Arab and Jew. In the great centuries of Arab civilization in North Africa and Spain, Jews took a happy and prominent part – in contrast to their ongoing persecution by the fanatics of the Christian West. Shorn of Western influence and Western imperialism, that harmony can reign once more.